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SUBJECT: NIGER: POL/ECON UPDATE FOR NOVEMBER 15 - 30, 2008

¶1. The following is an Embassy Niger compilation of political and economic highlights for the second half of November 2008 not otherwise covered in mission reporting. This report covers the following issues:

- Travel Warning Extended for the North
- Prison Letter from Former PM Hama Amadou
- Anti-Globalization Conference Held in Niamey
- Hajj Season off to a Rough Start
- Niger Ranks 32 out of 52 States in Child Wellbeing
- Monthly Donor Breakfast: Food Situation and Security

Travel Warning Extended for the North

¶2. On November 21, President Tandja signed an executive order extending the state of alert for the northern Agadez region for an additional 90-day period from its effective date of November 24. The state of alert has been in place since August 2007.

Prison Letter from Former PM Hama Amadou

¶3. From the Koutoukale prison where he is detained, former prime minister Hama Amadou wrote a letter dated November 20 to the members of the executive board of his political party - the National Movement for a Society of Development (MNSD), the main party of Niger's ruling coalition. Amadou said, "The crisis our party has been experiencing for about a year is caused by some of our fellow members in government, at the National Assembly, and within the executive board of the party who attempt to change by force, intimidation, and threats the MNSD's legitimate leadership...Our party has no leadership problem insofar as no one within the executive board has denied that Hama Amadou is and remains president of the party, until the time when the sponsors of his illegal imprisonment managed to strip him of his political rights by unlawful means."

¶4. Hama was very critical about the MNSD executive board's resolution on November 9 appointing an interim party president and a joint committee, made up of both Hama's supporters and detractors, to manage the party. He said, "In the current situation, I thought that the major concern for all party members...would be the release of the party's leader, who was arrested illegally and imprisoned arbitrarily...there is a fool's game, which I now understand clearly - give us the party's leadership, then we will see about the release of the one you call your president. It is tragic to see such lack of solidarity within a party...Unfortunately, I am afraid that if some of our fellow party members continue to have this attitude, the MNSD will likely split to the detriment of all." Hama urged his party members to observe fully the party's regulations in any move toward reconciliation. Anti-Globalization Conference Held in Niamey

¶5. On November 25-28, the African Social Forum (an anti-globalization movement) held its fifth conference in Niamey. The forum is an "open space for discussion, analysis, and the formulation of alternatives to neoliberal policies." The forum opened on November 25 with a march and rally that gathered about

10,000 people and during which activities chanted slogans like, "Another Africa is possible, down with imperialism, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, the G-8." Some shouted, "With Obama, a black person in the White House, the world has changed." Others called for, "A free, sovereign, and democratic Africa, governed by the rule of law." The forum's events included workshops, seminars, exhibits, films, and concerts covering topics such as food self-sufficiency and the right to food in the Sahel, environmental issues, women's rights and empowerment, and press freedom.

Hajj Season off to a Rough Start

¶6. The ordeal of Niger's pilgrims to Mecca continues due to poor organization of the Hajj, as the GON and private travel agencies struggled to find an adequate solution to the transportation issue to convey some 9,000 to Jeddah from Niamey. In September, the GON reviewed travel agency and airline service records over the past few years, and levied sanctions, ranging from suspension to termination against those with bad records. The Minister of Religious Affairs, while recognizing that the Hajj is an important commercial activity, cited "crookery and fraud in special travel documents" and "bad practices that nearly created diplomatic incidents" with some countries.

¶7. The GON called for bids, wherein Yemenia Airways and Ethiopian Airlines and their Nigerien partners were selected to carry Nigerien pilgrims. Under this measure, Sahel Airlines, a partner of Yemenia Airways, was to carry about 6,000 pilgrims out of a total of 9,000. In October, the GON terminated the contract with Sahel Airlines, but a court ruling ordered the GON to honor the agreement. This process delayed the Hajj organization, with thousands of pilgrims who came to Niamey from all parts of the country incurring great hardship.

Niger Ranks 32 out of 52 States in Child Wellbeing

¶8. The African Child Policy Forum recently released the "African Report on Child Wellbeing 2008." The report ranks Niger 32 among 52 African nations surveyed, classifying the GON under the "Child-Friendly Index" in the intermediate category of "Fairly Child-Friendly." This was mainly for two reasons: first, as a result of the GON putting in place fairly appropriate legal provisions to protect children against abuse and exploitation; and secondly, because of its fair commitment in allocating a relatively high share of its national budget to provide for the basic needs of children. Niger ranked 35th in the combined index for provision of basic services for children, which is measured based on two elements: budgetary commitment and child-related outcomes achieved.

Monthly Donor Breakfast: Food Security and Prices

¶9. Participants made the following observations regarding food security and prices during the November 24 monthly donor's breakfast in Niamey:

-- Favorable 2008 rains enabled Niger to set record harvest levels for every major crop. On the average, the cereals production level is 20% higher than last year and 29% more than the five-year average. This makes a fourth consecutive good annual harvest for Niger. Neighboring countries recorded similar bumper harvests.

-- Prices for key food staples (millet and sorghum) did not fall steeply as they usually do following the September-October harvest and, currently the average price for these locally-grown staples is 30% higher than this time last year. At the same time, the cost of imported rice, a major staple for urban populations, is over 40% higher than this time last year.

-- These higher costs are making it harder for poor people who have to buy food to satisfy their daily minimum dietary requirements. There is much concern that prices will continue to climb in the months ahead, thereby obliging poor people to consume less. This issue of food accessibility will loom larger as farm families

exhaust their household stocks in a few months' time. Meanwhile, the GON is working with donors to replenish its cereal reserves but higher prices mean less grain is being purchased with planned budgets.

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